

Most Montgomery council members survive primary

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The few Montgomery County voters who showed up at the polls Tuesday didn't punish incumbents for raising taxes and cutting services, apparently ousting just one County Council member in the wake of the wealthy suburb's most dire budget crisis.

With half of the county's precincts reporting, just one council member seeking re-election appeared to be out of a job.

According to the early results, Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, D-at large, was the lone incumbent who failed to garner the votes to stay in office. She was surpassed by challenger Hans Riemer, a voter outreach coordinator during President Obama's campaign. And challenger Becky Wagner, executive director of Interfaith Works, was also just a few percentage points from finishing in fourth place -- the top four vote-getters move on to November's general election.

At-large Council Members Marc Elrich, George Leventhal and Nancy Floreen received the most votes among Democrats.

The county Board of Elections plans to count absentee and provisional ballots in the coming days.

Generally, the Democratic primary is tantamount to the general election in the liberal stronghold, meaning the legislative body likely will remain largely unchanged the next four years.

In the lone open seat, state Del. Craig Rice maintained a double-digit lead over former Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson. The two were the main contenders for the upcounty seat held by Councilman Mike Knapp, who decided not to run for re-election.

Throughout the day, poll workers remained idle, the byproduct of a disinterested voter base in a non-presidential election year.

Still, in 2006, 120,944 county residents showed up at the polls and nearly 140,000 voted in the primary, including absentee and provisional ballots.

Early returns Tuesday came up far short of that total.

At Bethesda Elementary School, one of the largest precincts in the county, campaign staffers outnumbered voters at times -- even during the expected after-work rush.

"It's surprising and unfortunate," said Bethesda's Sharada Rao. "There are plenty of countries where people can't even vote. By not showing up, it's like pissing on that right."

The low turnout appeared to favor incumbents, who enjoyed whatever scant name recognition existed in the race.

George Franklin, of Rockville, admitted he had to read up on the council candidates before voting. He then decided to vote for most of the current council members.

"If things are going OK, why not let them stay in office," he said, while leaving a mostly empty polling station at Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville. "I voted mostly for incumbents and that Riemer guy because he seemed to have the most energetic campaign."

Still, some used their votes to lash out at what they consider runaway bureaucracy, as county employees' salaries and benefits far eclipse neighboring jurisdictions'.

"I vote Democrat, but I really don't like the teachers union," said Jack Daggitt of Bethesda. "It's supposed to be about the kids, and it's not with them. I didn't vote for anybody who received the [Montgomery County Education Association] endorsement."